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ABSTRACT

The Third College at the University of California, San Diego developed a peer observation program in which first-year composition instructors (mostly graduate teaching assistants) observe each other once per quarter. The peer observation program is not part of the process by which the writing program directors evaluate the instructors, but instructors' participation is required. The benefits from the program have been great: (1) peer observation lets instructors see students from a different angle of vision; (2) new instructors are receptive to learning from someone on their own level; (3) observers see new teaching technique in an actual classroom setting; and (4) there is value in receiving a classroom visitor. Several variations on models of peer observation techniques are possible. The program benefits include better communication among instructors, an enhanced sense of instructional mission, an improved atmosphere of cooperation in the program, and more confidence and self-esteem on the part of the instructors. In 1992, the program will be linked to social science and humanities courses. Because of its formative and exploratory nature, peer observation enables any writing program to become more collegial as it helps individual instructors to become more reflective of their own practices and more supportive of one another. (A peer observation form and lists of the focal areas for classroom observers and class observation categories are attached.) (RS)

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Peer Observation For Instructor Training and Program Development

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Here's what our graduate student instructors say about our peer observation program for new writing teachers:

"You realize the variety from class to class, the different worlds we've created for our students."

"You build rapport; you're more likely to share ideas afterward."

"Talking to other instructors is great, but sitting in their class is different. Everybody tells one story, but does something different in the classroom."

"It's like being a voyeur: you can see without being seen. You're borderline invisible. Your presence is only minimally felt so it is ignored and you can spy on the class and see through the looking glass a glimpse of a picture in some ways a mirror of your own class."

Our composition program in Third College at the University of California, San Diego is medium-sized. Every quarter we teach about 450 students in 30 sections of our two-course sequence. Charles Cooper is our Director, Susan MacDonald is Assistant Director, and I am the Lecturer. Aside from the three of us, most of the other instructors, about 15, are graduate student teaching assistants. During their first year teaching in the program, they meet with us for weekly teaching seminars, and we observe them teaching a number of times. Beginning last year, we have been asking our first-year instructors to also observe one another. They give me their schedules and I pair them up according to compatible times. They go to visit each other once each quarter. After each visit, they write a brief summary and evaluation of the

class and meet with each other to exchange summaries and discuss teaching. The reports which the instructors write after visiting each other's classes are given only to the instructor whose class was visited. No copy is given to the writing program directors. The peer observation program is not part of the process by which the writing program directors evaluate the instructors, except that instructors' participation in the observation program is required. During weekly writing program meetings, discussion of classroom visits is at first limited to logistical concerns--who will visit whose class when. Later follow-up discussion focuses on the insights gained by seeing another instructor and his or her students engaged in classroom work. We discuss general patterns and new insights, rather than specific critiques of any one instructor's classroom performance. I am working on a study of this new aspect of our program. I have just completed a round of interviews with our current group of first-year instructors who are all participating in our peer observation program.

The benefits from this program have been great. I'll tell you about four areas of benefit. I call the first benefit a new angle of vision, the second benefit the equality of peer observation, the third benefit learning new teaching techniques, and the fourth benefit the value of receiving a classroom visitor, of being observed.

First of all, peer observation lets instructors see students from a different angle of vision, to see what the class's reaction is from behind the scenes. The visitor to the class spots boredom faster and sees when the teacher is talking too much. Also, a

visiting instructor often realizes she's assumed too much about what students already know. One instructor told me that after observing, she understood better the kinds of things students were unclear about. She could see the students' confusion in her colleague's class. The students her colleague was looking at were nodding, but others were frowning. She told me she was able to see these dynamics of how students respond more clearly in her colleague's class than in her own because while observing she wasn't teaching. She told me, "You can't observe and perform at the same time. You can't analyze and do the job at the same time. Observing lets me look into a teaching situation similar to mine and say 'Oh, this is what I look like when I'm in front of students.' I can see candidly how the students are reacting since I'm not concentrating on teaching."

When visiting instructors look at a class from this different angle of vision, they see which topics they need to stress more and they see how another teacher responds to different types of students. Another thing they can do is get an insider's view of small group work. By discreetly watching one group at work on a task, they see from a fresh perspective how students operate in groups.

The second benefit to peer observation emerges from the fact that it is peer observation--equals observing equals. In this case, inexperience is helpful. Criticism and suggestions from peers are less threatening. New instructors are receptive to learning from someone on their own level. By visiting each other and then talking about their classes, instructors can take the

program goals and then discuss with another instructor ways of getting this material across to the students. In this way, teachers can construct knowledge together. This knowledge is deeper than that developed in isolation, or in consultation only with a supervisor.

The affective dimension is important too. Visiting another teacher's class is reconfirming, reassuring that you're on the right track, that you're doing okay. One instructor told me that it was supportive reinforcement to hear the things she would say in class come out of someone else's mouth. She knew then that they were operating along the same lines, that she wasn't off base. She said she felt better about her own teaching after sitting in on her colleague's class, because now she had a basis for comparison. This particular instructor has a background in professional sports and admitted she felt a need to rank herself against her colleagues and this gave her a way to do that. She also distinguished two stages of perception. During her first quarter teaching, she felt empathy for her colleague when she foundered in class: "Oh God, she's so nervous, too--just like I am. I hope she doesn't pass out." By her second quarter teaching, she was ready to look for things to learn from her colleague's teaching, even from her colleague's imperfections. She said, "I recognized flaws of mine in her presentation. I saw I was that way too, so now I can fix it."

The third area that benefits from peer observation is learning new teaching techniques. For example, watching their colleagues lead discussions, observers see techniques for involving everybody,

keeping track of who has spoken yet and who hasn't, calling on a student by name to encourage her to offer a contribution, and other tricks to get people talking. They learn new ways of organizing writing workshops and using readings. They even learn about the physical components of the classroom dynamics--moving around the room, standing up, sitting down, writing on the board.

So far I've discussed three areas of benefit to instructors from peer observation--a new angle of vision, the equality of peer observation, and learning new teaching techniques. All three of these benefits go to the visiting instructor, the one doing the observing. It's true that in peer observation it's usually the colleague doing the observing who benefits the most. Being observed has a lot going for it too though, and this is the fourth and final benefit I'll tell you about--the value of receiving a classroom visitor, of being observed. One instructor told me that having the visitor in the classroom gave her an extra spur, and it also made the students more motivated--they wanted to put their best effort forward. The energy level was higher than normal. And she said that having a peer observe doesn't intimidate students the way it can when a supervisor visits. Of course an instructor can also get the more traditional benefit from being observed--useful feedback on her teaching. This shouldn't be the major emphasis, however, since we want to keep it non-judgmental.

Now I'm going to turn to practical recommendations for peer observation programs. In terms of logistics, William Irmscher proposes three stages for peer observation. The first is the pre-observation conference, where the two instructors define for each

other what they plan to accomplish during a class session and indicate what they would like the other to observe. The second stage is the actual observation, and the third stage is the post-observation meeting--to discuss results and talk about teaching. Then each writes a report to the director, not evaluating the teaching of the other, but commenting on the value of the experience itself.

Here are some more logistics, these from Michael Moore about visitation etiquette for peer observation:

-- Set the date in advance.

-- Agree on observer's role: remain quietly anonymous, have presence explained, or participate fully.

--Arrive early.

--Take copious observational notes.

--Discuss class afterwards with the instructor.

And a few suggestions for giving feedback:

--Be specific.

--Be non-threatening--begin with what impressed you favorably to establish a supportive atmosphere.

--Phrase criticism constructively, emphasizing alternatives.

--Put positive feedback in first person, so that praise becomes a personal validation.

Several variations on this model are possible. For example, the reciprocal observational pairs could have one novice instructor and one experienced instructor. This would be a mentor/mentee approach. Videotaping could also be used, so instructors could see tapes of each other's classes whenever their schedules permitted,

and then discuss them together. Peer observation could also be the core of a seminar on teaching writing.

I've already discussed some benefits individual instructors in our program have received from peer observation, so now I'll mention some benefits our program as a whole has received. The program benefits of our peer observation program include better communication among instructors, an enhanced sense of our instructional mission, an improved atmosphere of cooperation in the program, and more confidence and self-esteem on the part of the instructors in regard to their teaching. In addition, the peer observation program has helped to promote a respect for personal differences in instructional style, while at the same time fostering a new awareness that not all of this diversity has to stay idiosyncratic--that instructors can learn from observing one another and implement what they've learned in their own classrooms. It is a non-threatening means of increasing instructor accountability; since instructors gain a better understanding of what their colleagues are doing to teach the same classes they are, they develop better appreciation of their own strengths and weaknesses in the classroom as well as those of their peers.

I'm going to conclude by talking about an aspect of peer observation programs that's especially relevant to me now--that of the different functions it may have for a well established program and a new program. For the last two years, our instructors have been observing one another in the context of our on-going composition program. This has helped them develop their individual teaching styles and also allowed them to become socialized to the

particular culture of our program. But next year our program will change. From a stand-alone program, we are changing to a program linked to social science and humanities courses. In this new context, peer observation will be even more important, as all of us work to explore new teaching strategies and different classroom dynamics.

I'm glad that we've already set up our peer observation program. We've been learning a lot as a result of it and it will help us a great deal next year with the challenge of our new course. Because of its formative and exploratory nature, peer observation helps any writing program to become more collegial as it helps individual instructors to become more reflective of their own practice and more supportive of one another.

PEER OBSERVATION FORM

Class observed by: _____

Class taught by: _____

Class and date: _____

What was the focus of the class?

What were the activities?

What else of note happened during the class?

What is the single most important thing about teaching in general or about your own teaching you learned from observing this class?

_____

Signature of observer

_____

Signature of instructor

Focal Areas for Classroom Observers

1. Behavior before class begins. Because the tone of the class often reveals itself before the class begins, the observer should begin recording behavior as soon as students begin to arrive in the room. Do students talk to each other? How are the chairs arranged?

2. The beginning of class. The teacher's planning and organization is often reflected in the first few minutes. Does the teacher start with a question? Look through a briefcase for notes? Have the class write briefly? Put students in groups?

3. Patterns of talk. As the observer notes the frequency and nature of exchanges between students and teacher, patterns and modes of discussion will emerge. Who asks the questions in this class? Do students respond to each other directly?

4. Classroom movement. Noting movement can prove useful even when the observer initially has no idea what it means. Does the teacher stay in one place or move around? Where and how does the teacher move? Does the teacher pick up on nonverbal cues or movement and call on students? What are the students' movements like?

5. Eye contact. By noting who and what teacher and students look at in the course of a class, the observer can often find out why a discussion is shaped the way it is. While talking, where is the teacher looking? When the students talk, where is the teacher looking? Do students look at each other or at the teacher while other students talk?

6. The blackboard and other audiovisual equipment. How are these used? Do both students and teachers use them? What happens in the class as the teacher writes on the board?

7. Questions and directions. Does the teacher ask simply factual questions or questions at several cognitive levels? Do students pair up and briefly discuss a major question to stimulate discussion? Does the teacher tolerate brief silences after questions? Are directions printed out or on the blackboard?

8. Voice and mannerisms. What stands out about the teacher's voice, pacing, and delivery? Does the teacher smile or nod approval? What are the students' voices like?

9. End of class. Does the teacher summarize or have students do it? Does the teacher review what students are to do for next time?

Adapted from: Michael C. Flanigan. "Observing Teaching: Discovering and Developing the Individual's Teaching Style." WPA: Writing Program Administration 3.2 (1979): 17-24.

CLASS OBSERVATION CATEGORIES

ORGANIZATION

Content: Introduces topic, previews material to be covered, relates it to past and future. Establishes set and achieves closure.

Time: Use of time consistent with goals of lesson, difficulty of material; variety of activities.

Space: Physical arrangement of classroom.

MATERIALS

Texts, readings.
Writing assignments, quizzes, exercises, games, class activities.
Examples, illustrations, and applications to student experience.
Use of blackboards, handouts, audio-visual aids.

DISCUSSION

Patterns of Interaction

Teacher-centered: teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher.
Student-centered: student-to-student, students taking initiative in raising questions and volunteering information.
Small group, pairs.

Types of Teacher Questions

Information: "Recitation" questions designed to test student knowledge or reinforce learning.
Application: "Can you identify?" "Reword," etc.
Evaluation: Asking for evaluation or opinion.
Process: Asking for student feedback. "Should we discuss A or B first?"

Teacher Responses to Student Answers

Positive or negative reinforcement: acceptance, approval, rejection, or correction.
Probe: "What do you mean?" "Can you give an example?" "Is that what you meant?"
Redirect: Asks another student comment on first answer.
Restates student's answer.
Answers own question.

NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOR

Delivery skills.
Response to student contributions.

Source: Sara Latham Stelzner, "Peer Training in a Teaching Improvement Program for TAs." ERIC ED 285 503.